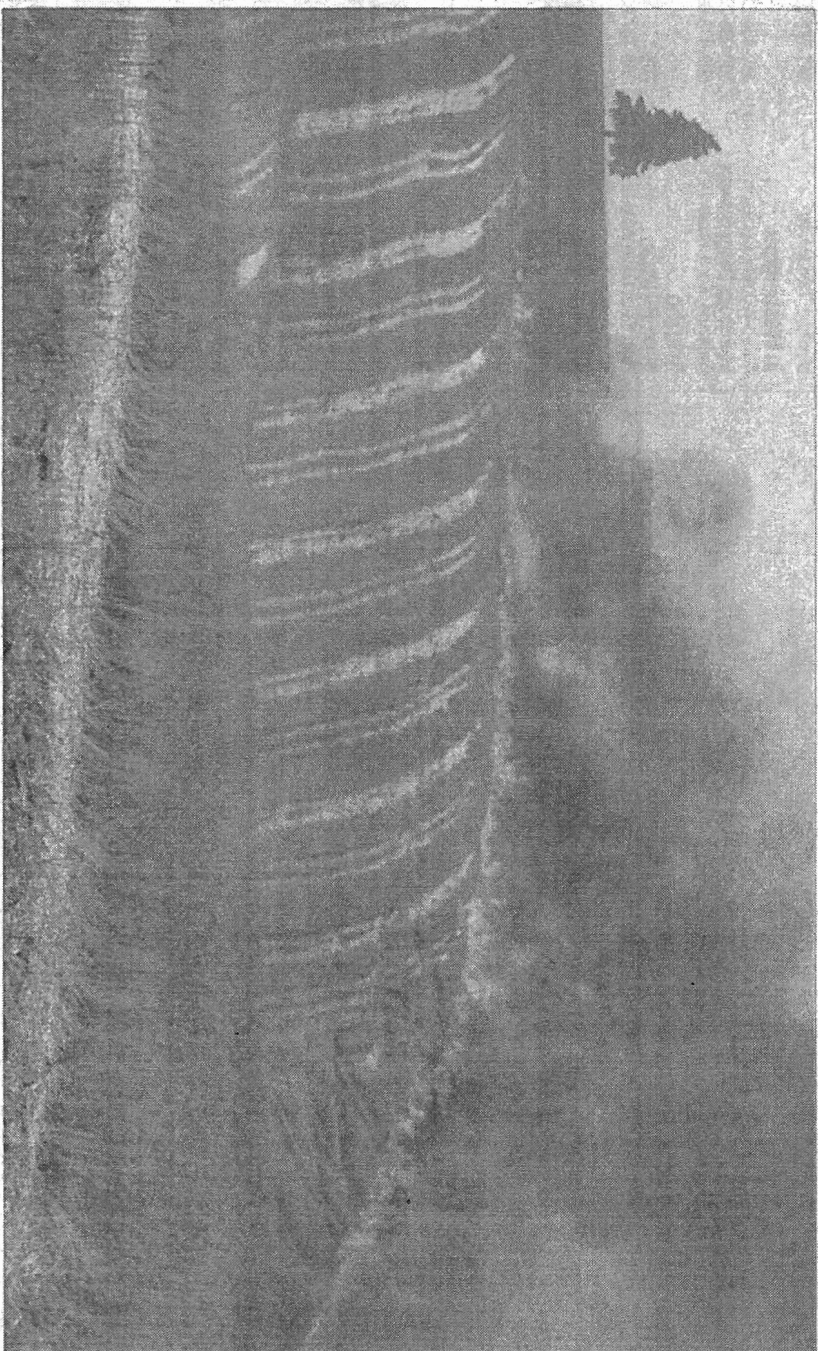


Burning hillsides

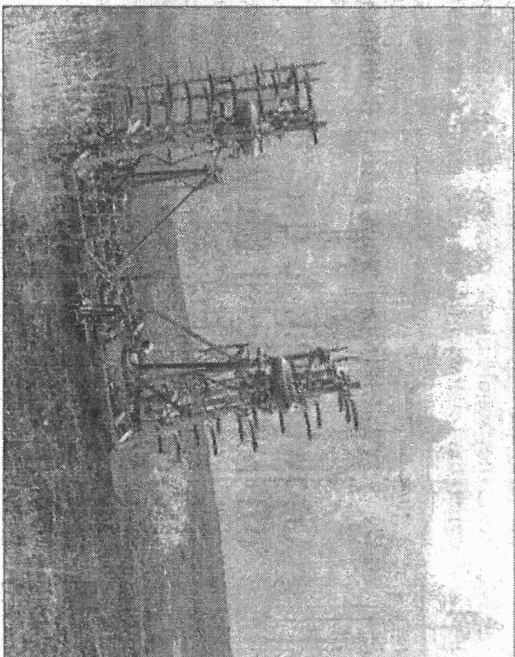


Photos by Diane Longenecker/For the Capital Press

(Above) Flames scorch Eckler Mountain southeast of Dayton, Wash. The wildfires, known as the Columbia Complex, have burned more than 80,000 acres in Eastern Washington, destroying personal property, crops, equipment and livestock.

(Right) Flames from the Columbia Complex fire have swept through farmland and wooded hillsides, leaving a swath of destruction for farmers and ranchers in burned areas.

More inside
Fire coverage: See
related story and photo on
Page 3.



Fire leaves need for feed and fencing

Farmers still unable to assess entire impact

By **SHERYL HARRIS**
Freelance Writer

More than 88,652 acres — nearly three-quarters of it privately owned — have burned in southeastern Washington's Columbia County since lightning struck near Dayton on Aug. 21.

As of Sept. 5, some county residents were still under evacuation, and many have not been able to get to their livestock, pastures or crops to assess the damage.

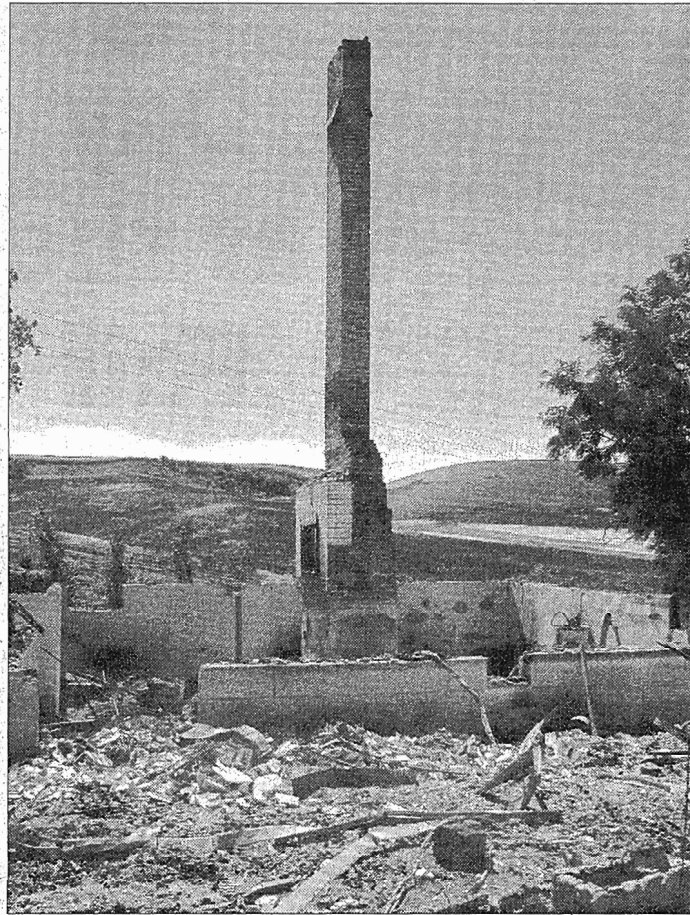
Already, though, ranchers say they are in desperate need of two things: fencing and feed.

Tanya Patton, daughter of rancher Wilbur Eaton, with the help of some other fire victims, has tried to assess the damage to understand the needs of the county's ranchers.

Lack of fencing and feed will force many ranchers to reduce their herds unless they can find — and afford — more feed to carry them through late winter and early spring when there is pasture again.

They can use their winter feed but then they will not have enough to get through winter. So, they need either feed now to replace the lost pasture, or they need feed for spring — to replace the lost winter feed.

Patton said almost all of the 20 ranchers she spoke with have



Diane Longanecker/ For the Capital Press
Smoke rises from Lester and Jana Eaton's burned out home. On Aug. 22, wind-driven flames swept across the Eatons' farmstead on Crall Hollow near Dayton, Wash.

lost a minimum of six to eight weeks of pasture grazing.

Even with feed, fencing is a must-have, no matter what, they said. The sooner fences are back up the sooner any unburned pasture can be used.

Ranchers told Patton the going rate for hay is \$100 to \$150 per ton, depending on its qual-

ity. They estimate they will need about 1,400 tons of hay to offset pasture loss. To put that into perspective, a ton of hay will feed two cows for a month. Patton said they know of 1,923 cows so far that have been displaced or affected.

Because burned wire loses its strength and won't hold live-

stock, replacement fencing is essential. While the livestock is not in immediate danger of starvation, ranchers are having to begin using winter feed two or three months early.

More than 50 miles of fencing has already been reported damaged or gone, and there will be much more when the producers are able to get to their property to assess the damage.

Eaton said he'll need to replace 16 miles of fencing at a cost of \$5,000-\$9,000 per mile.

By law, cattle in Washington must be fenced. If not, the owner is liable for any damage, including that done to or by people who hit livestock on the road. The owners can also be fined if their cattle get into state forest areas.

The losses ranchers face translate into losses for the area economy.

"We figure each cow is worth about \$3,000 to the local economy in support services," said Washington Cattlemen's Association Executive Vice President Jack Field. "That includes anybody who has anything at all to do with that cow's survival — the gas station, the tire store, farm supply store, even grocery store."

Insurance is either not readily available, doesn't cover such losses, or costs more than the smaller producers can manage.

"Livestock loss can be insured, but it is separate from other policies, and I don't know anybody around here who sells it," said Field.

To donate

To donate money for fencing and feed contact Jack Field, executive vice president Washington Cattlemen's Association, 509-925-9871 or wacattle@elltel.net.

To donate goods such as hay or fencing materials, contact Tanya Patton at 509-382-4458 or tjpatton@velocitus.net.

The fires continued to burn earlier this week.

Pacific Northwest national Incident Management Team 2 reports the fire is only 25 percent contained as of Sept. 4, with no end in sight.

"We don't know what the impact will be as yet," said Field. "Can they plant on the burned fields next season or will they have to wait a year or two? Will they be forced off of their summer pastures? We don't know yet."

Present levels of smoke, ash, and dust pose potential health problems for livestock, especially when they are penned in a small area because that is the only area that has secure fencing.

Then there is the possibility of serious flooding this year because the vegetation that normally slows runoff from rain and snowmelt is no longer there. Not only will producers lose valuable top soil, the town of Dayton remembers when two feet of water flooded the streets 10 years ago.